

## BOOK REVIEW

Bill J. Leonard, *A Sense of the Heart: Christian Religious Experience in the United States*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2014. 379 pp. \$44.99.

From colonial times to the present, religious experience has been an active, often dominant, feature of American Christianity. In many American circles, undergoing a conversion experience is more valuable than being baptized. To this very day, children who are nurtured in certain evangelical environments are taught that unless they have a “born again” experience, they cannot claim to be authentic Christians. It should come as no surprise that American Methodists added experience (with “experience” understood more broadly than simply religious experience) to their interpretive theological guidelines, alongside the Anglican sources of scripture, reason, and tradition.

Bill J. Leonard, the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Baptist Studies and professor of church history in the School of Divinity, Wake Forest University, serves the student of American Christian history well with his historical survey of Christian religious experience in the United States. His sweeping survey extends from the time of early European settlement of what would become the United States, to the end of the second millennium, identifying trends that carry over into the present day. The author cautions the reader that the variety of religious experience throughout the nation’s history necessitates a representative survey rather than an all inclusive one. Nevertheless, I found his work quite comprehensive. Not only does Leonard cover the familiar phenomena of awakenings, camp meetings, and urban crusades; he also devotes considerable attention to historically non-mainstream movements like the Shakers and the Oneida Community, and to the increasingly influential force of the Mormons. He examines the lives and work of important figures—among whom are Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, and Dwight L. Moody—also giving significant space to the lives, teachings, and experiences of such “off-beat” leaders and celebrities as Emmanuel Swedenborg, Andrew Jackson Davis, and the Fox sisters.

One merit of the book is its extensive exposition of African American and Roman Catholic religious experience. In spite of their size and influence in American history, these two communities have often been neglected in mainstream narratives of religious experience. The emphasis on conversion as the conveying of personhood to the overlooked human in African American theology exerted a formative influence upon the Civil Rights movement. Leonard understands the development of Roman Catholic experience to be distinct from that of Protestants through most of American history—but surely, such distinctiveness has blurred since Vatican II. Perhaps it would be

worthwhile to study how Protestant-Catholic interaction over the past fifty years has affected the evolution of religious experience in the United States.

Another strength of this text is its inclusion of focused academic interpretations of various historic figures and movements. Leonard uses these studies to illuminate the subject under consideration, rather than to engage in any scholarly debate, but he gives the student a place to go for further study.

Leonard's analysis turns to special consideration of Methodists Peter Cartwright and Phoebe Palmer, representing nineteenth-century frontier piety and the Holiness Movement, respectively. From Cartwright's *Autobiography*, Leonard traces Methodist influences upon the Second Great Awakening, giving particular attention to the way Methodist preachers shortened the conversion process and emphasized individual participation in the conversion experience. Then, beginning with John Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection, Leonard traces the development of Phoebe Palmer's Altar Theology through the historic Second Blessing of the Holiness Movement, to the tongues, signs, and wonders of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements. Beyond these two exemplars, Methodism stands alongside other mainline Protestant denominations.

Leonard borrows the phrase, a Sense of the Heart, from Jonathan Edwards as "a unifying motif for ordering varied approaches to religious experience evident in multiple individuals, groups, and contexts" (xi). This imprecise concept is broad enough to encompass the scope of the multiform phenomena under scrutiny. Beyond historiography, I believe that some theological reflection is also in order, in response to questions like these: might the current trend of believing without belonging crash in a dead end of spiritual solipsism? Or will it bear fruit in a new general Awakening? Furthermore, can a genuine Christian spirituality end with personal meaning and self-fulfillment divorced from participation in God's new creation for the entire world?

Bill Leonard has given us a sound historical platform for further exploration in what he identifies as an emerging area of academic research. His is an authoritative voice, both from his own life story and from his academic research into the history of religious experience.

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